Even a Mailbox Has Its 15 Minutes of Fame

By Linda Wheeler
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As mailboxes go, the one at the corner of 37th and R streets NW appears ordinary. The Postal Service's white eagle soars across an expanse of bright blue, and other than a few rusty spots and chipped areas that show an underlayer of red paint, it is just another mailbox anchored to earth by a pad of concrete.

That was until Tuesday. On that day, CIA counterintelligence officer Aldrich Ames was charged with being a double agent, and the blue bin at the corner became the Spy Mailbox.

Ames allegedly left a chalk mark on the box to signal that he wanted to meet his Russian contacts. Due north, at the top of a hill between Tunlaw Road and Wisconsin Avenue, is the starkly modern Russian diplomatic compound, surrounded by high fences and locked gates. On a trip from there to the Russian Embassy on 16th Street NW, a spy might easily drive through the Burleith neighborhood and past 37th and R.

Yesterday, spies would have been slowed at the busy intersection just north of Georgetown University by drivers stopping to point at the box. Photographers, professional and amateur, showed up most of the day to take pictures of the scene. Pedestrians paused to stare at the mailbox that had made TV news.

"This is pretty cool," said 21-year-old Georgetown student Brian Ross as two photographers documented him mailing a Visa bill payment.

"I used to mail love letters from here at 4 a.m.," said Brent Schindele, 22, a graduate student in foreign policy. "Do you think I was being watched?"

"We were astonished when we saw the mailbox on TV," said the neighborhood postal carrier, speaking of his colleagues. He refused to give his name, explaining, "I don't have anything to do with that spy stuff."

He had just delivered letters to retired George Washington University professor Ronald Thompson, whose house shares the northwest corner of the intersection with the now-famous mailbox. Thompson is something of a mailbox watcher.

"My desk is at the window and I see the mailbox every time I look out," he said. "We call the corner 'mailbox corner' because it is such a busy place. Commuters coming down from Tunlaw Road stop here to mail their letters. All the students use it. I've mailed letters there for 37 years."

Thompson said he wishes he had noticed a man chalking the mailbox, but he didn't. He has noticed a dozen or more photographers taking pictures of what he thinks of as his mailbox.

One of those photographers was Brad Markel, 40, a photographer of important national and international events in Washington for 15 years. Shooting for the photo agency Gamma, he had known without any editor telling him that he needed some kind of interesting picture of the 4½-foot-tall mailbox.

He finally settled on an extremely wide-angle lens and got down on the ground so the mailbox would kind of loom over him against a rainy sky.

"It's pretty hard to make a mailbox look good," Markel said. "It's kind of static. It doesn't do anything. It just sits there."

BY JUANA ARIAS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Brad Markel, on assignment for the Gamma photo agency, tries for a special angle on the mailbox that has been linked to the CIA spy case.